

Review Article

Clio: The Archivist's Muse?

by TERRY COOK

The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing, 1900-1970. CARL BERGER. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976. x, 300 p. ISBN 0 19 540252 9 \$12.50.

The Future of History: Essays in the Vanderbilt University Centennial Symposium. Edited by CHARLES F. DELZELL. Nashville, Tenn: Vanderbilt University Press, c1977. xi, 263 p. ISBN 08265 1205 4 \$13.95.

At the beginning of the decade, it was fashionable for some researchers to assert that archivists were merely failed historians. History students incapable of achieving their doctorate and teaching at the university shuffled off to become archivists. As a corollary, the archivist really worth his salt soon left for a professorship — and several prominent examples reinforced this claim. It followed that archival education was a hoax. What was there to teach? Granted, some on-the-job instruction in technical matters might benefit the novice already trained in history, but work that was more clerical than professional, filled as it allegedly was with mere boxing and listing of records, hardly required a distinctive preparation at university, let alone at the graduate school level. Researchers entertaining these views certainly appreciated the service they received from archivists, but the suggestion that those serving them were their professional equals would have seemedposterous.

Five to eight years ago I frequently heard such opinions bandied about by fellow graduate students. In fact, I personally had to overcome these misconceptions before turning from university teaching to archives. This change was greatly facilitated by certain developments in the 1970s. In the first place, archives began hiring more people with an M.A. or Ph.D. in history and these new archivists were challenged rather than bored by the responsibilities they faced. The formation of the Association of Canadian Archivists and the work of several of its committees readily demonstrated that archival science was more than boxing and listing documents. And the complexity of issues discussed in *Archivaria* attested to a growing professionalism. Certainly historical training cast little light upon such central archival concerns as records management, computerized information control, conservation, public administration, financial appraisal of documents, and freedom of information. In short, it became clear that the truly professional archivist maintains a delicate balance between such specialized concerns and more traditional academic training, usually in history, but equally in literature, law, architecture, art, engineering, or whatever best illuminates the records for which he is responsible.

Given this challenging dichotomy, a disturbing tendency is now evident in the Association of Canadian Archivists and among archivists generally. While the old image of the archivist as little more than an historian in new circumstances has faded, is not the pendulum now swinging too far in the opposite direction? By rushing to establish the credentials of the new Association and the profession it represents, have Canadian archivists not stressed too shrilly the ways in which they are not tied to history? In his formal welcome to *Archivaria*, the ACA's first president reduced history to merely one of eight "areas of specialist knowledge and skill" desirable for the "complete archivist."¹ When reviewing the history of archival education, a well-known author on the subject boldly asserted that "there is no compelling reason why archivists should continue to be recruited exclusively from those trained in any other subject or profession."² More serious than any of the above, some of my professional colleagues exhibit an appalling ignorance of new developments in Canadian history. The names of such first-rank historians as Craig Brown, Fernand Ouellet, and Carl Berger are greeted with blank stares. The pioneering work of the last two in socio-economic and intellectual history respectively (and their most important contributions date back to 1966 and 1970!) is clearly unknown. This sorry situation doubtless results from the small place history has been accorded in the recent archival scheme of things. What incentive is there to keep abreast of new historiographical developments if history is repudiated as an essential part of the archivist's craft? What archival institution recognizes in any tangible manner such expertise when demonstrated through publications, the acquisition of higher degrees, or involvement in learned associations? If continued, this tendency to downplay history will upset the delicate dichotomy referred to above and greatly reduce the archivist's claim to professionalism.

Strong words! After all, what does history or other academic training offer to the archivist? In the first place, the research techniques of the historian are essential for the archivist working with large collections and desiring to produce inventories and administrative histories that will both stimulate academic research and stand scholarly scrutiny. Furthermore, in order to answer inquiries properly, a good comprehension of the academic milieu in which the researcher functions is mandatory. Few things should be more rewarding to an archivist than bringing together researchers working on related topics or pointing out previously untouched areas for scholarly investigation. To do so obviously demands a close familiarity with the scholars and literature of a given field, as well as with the archival records. If this kind of interaction occurred regularly, archives would become as much as universities true "communities of scholars." Indeed, the great "renaissance of Canadian history" (Berger, p.30) during the 1920s occurred precisely because of such dialogue between archivists and historians.

The types of finding aids, guides, indexes, and inventories which archivists create should be designed to meet researchers' needs. With limited resources and growing collections, clearly every desirable project cannot be realized. How, then, are archivists to set their custodial priorities? If reference aids are produced in ignorance of research trends and requirements, how can archival priorities bear any relationship to research realities?

Acquisition is the most important area for this historical-archival interaction. While researchers can live, however unhappily, with poor reference service and outdated or non-existent finding aids, they cannot function without collections of records for their field of study. Many new areas of historical investigation — women, labour, the family, technology, climatology, urban development, intellectual history — require

1 Gordon Dodds, "The Compleat Archivist," *Archivaria* 1 (Winter 1975-76): 83-85.

2 Edwin Welch, "Archival Education," *Archivaria* 4 (Summer 1977): 58.

new types of sources. In order to meet these needs archivists must be futurists; they must try to predict, then preserve, those parts of our cultural heritage that will be historically significant. How can they effectively carry out these responsibilities when falling so far behind that some have little idea of what has occurred historiographically during the past decade? How, then, can they possibly anticipate where historians will be heading in the next one? Clearly the three primary functions of any archives — acquisition, custody, and public service — rely heavily on archivists maintaining a sound knowledge of the academic field to which their records relate. Anything less means archivists are working in a vacuum.

The two volumes under review provide a good first step in meeting the above goals. Based on a symposium in 1975 to mark the centennial of Vanderbilt University, *The Future of History* contains eleven essays in which distinguished historians assess the main trends in their fields. The essays are aimed at historians rather than archivists and concentrate, therefore, upon new historiographical interpretations rather than new sources for exploitation. Moreover, five of the pieces are of rather peripheral importance, dealing with the history of Japan, Latin America, the American South, Renaissance and Reformation, and American foreign policy. The remaining six essays, however, are broader and contain precisely the historiographical information which archivists need: Lawrence Stone, the respected scholar of the aristocracy in Tudor and Stuart Britain, writes on "History and the Social Sciences in the Twentieth Century"; Stephan Thernstrom, historian of nineteenth-century Boston, investigates "The New Urban History"; Kenneth Lockridge, specialist in population and literacy studies for New England, illuminates "Historical Demography"; Bernard Cohen, author of works on Isaac Newton and Benjamin Franklin, looks at "The Many Faces of the History of Science"; Paul Conkin, investigator of the ideas of American puritans, Hutterites, and New Dealers, discusses "Intellectual History: Past, Present, and Future"; and Gordon Wright, expert on twentieth-century France, analyzes the problems of writing "Contemporary History in the Contemporary Age."

Central to most of the essays is the "new social history" or "history from the bottom up." Rebelling against Carlylean elitism or "history from the top down," the new social historians are interested primarily in impersonal "structures" enduring over long periods of time as well as the social and cultural history of ordinary people. One of the earlier and best examples is Fernand Braudel's 1949 publication on the Mediterranean world in the Age of Philip II in which the personal actions of the Emperor himself, treaties, wars, dynastic marriages, even the splendours of the Renaissance, are reduced to minor significance when compared to such inexorable factors as the sweeping tides of malaria, timber cutting, soil erosion, demographic growth and decline, bullion transfers, the price revolution, climatic changes, and new food patterns that influenced the lives of millions, quite irrespective of the political and national boundaries within which the history of the era had traditionally been written. Such "new" history is based less on state and personal papers and more on census reports, estate and municipal accounts, parish registers, and local and community records.

Lawrence Stone shows that, by gradually incorporating the methodological influences of sociology, psychology, economic theory, geography, demography, and anthropology, the new historians have displayed several distinguishing characteristics. In the first place, they wrote history analytically rather than narratively, asking not "what" and "how," but "why" and "what were the consequences." Secondly, they concentrated on three broad areas of human endeavour long familiar to other social scientists but until then ignored by historians: the material basis of human existence (the limitations imposed upon individuals by geography, demography, ecology, levels of technology, modes of production and distribution, economic growth, and capital accumulation), the history of society (studies of wealth, status, power, mobility, and

such institutions below the nation-state level as schools, universities, police, prisons, asylums, business firms, unions, museums, publishing houses, organized sport, town meetings, and the family), and cultural history (the effects upon mass opinion of new means of communication, literacy, censorship, the links of "high" culture, and such cultural activities of the semi-literate as festivals, rituals, religious revivalism, witchcraft, and modern popular entertainment). The third characteristic of the new history was its focus on the masses, on that 99 percent of the human race which before 1940 left behind no written record of its thoughts and actions. And, finally, the new historians have perfected three social science methodologies: community or local studies to illuminate broader patterns (not merely for their antiquarian or genealogical interest as previously undertaken), career-line analysis of a sample group of individuals, and quantification with the aid of the computer.

The new social history is not without its weaknesses. The misapplication of social science models can produce ahistorical results. Psychohistory is the best example, although work with theoretical economic models and political voting patterns is not far behind. When psychological insights are used to illuminate evidence, the results can be richly stimulating but, when evidence is sought primarily to fit or "prove" some psychological model, the past is necessarily distorted. A second danger is faddishness. Many "new" historians exude an almost messianic conviction that history not concerned with the oppressed and inarticulate is at best old fashioned and at worst irrelevant. Such a "new" topic as "Buggery and the British Navy During the Napoleonic Wars" — not, Stone notes, one of "the more historically significant aspects of that period of European crisis and upheaval" — carries "fashionable faddishness" too far. Finally, the computer is the social historian's best friend and worst enemy. It opens many doors, but leads as well up many blind alleys. Certainly the computer "can answer more questions and test more multiple correlations than any human mind could handle in a lifetime," but it also demands data in clearly defined, precise categories. Life is fortunately not like that: the ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity of reality sometimes cannot be logically coded for machine manipulation. Quantitative analysis can, furthermore, lead to "a simplistic mechanistic determinism" by which only the quantifiable aspects of human endeavour are deemed to be historically significant. By ignoring the crucial role in history of the irrational, personal idiosyncrasy, and accident, computerized history can become sterile.

Stone's essay, and those which follow on urban history, demography, and the history of science that flesh out his ideas, offer many insights to new historiographical trends. From the examples and interpretations given, the archivist can readily read between the lines to discover the new types of sources that must be collected and understood. Of particular interest is the piece on the history of science. Many archivists, especially in federal, provincial, and university archives, collect the records of agencies having a large component of research scientists. As few archivists have any scientific training, the problem of assessing the potential historical significance of technical scientific notebooks, laboratory reports, draft monographs, and so forth is difficult indeed. Cohen's essay sheds some light on this issue.

Taking a different tack, Conkin argues shamelessly for elitist intellectual history. Social analysis may well allow historians to learn that each spring a particular tribe went further up the mountain but, until some knowledge of its value systems and ideals is obtained, which means studying the ideas of its articulate leaders, no one will know whether the tribe wanted greener pastures for its flocks or closer proximity during summer solstice to the sun god which its members worshipped. In short, the human mind is the basic factor in history. Human motivation and, thus, history itself is not based necessarily on what *was* real and quantifiable, but on what people *perceived* to be real. The study of systems of ideas is consequently not likely to be soon discarded.

such institutions below the nation-state level as schools, universities, police, prisons, asylums, business firms, unions, museums, publishing houses, organized sport, town meetings, and the family), and cultural history (the effects upon mass opinion of new means of communication, literacy, censorship, the links of "high" culture, and such cultural activities of the semi-literate as festivals, rituals, religious revivalism, witchcraft, and modern popular entertainment). The third characteristic of the new history was its focus on the masses, on that 99 percent of the human race which before 1940 left behind no written record of its thoughts and actions. And, finally, the new historians have perfected three social science methodologies: community or local studies to illuminate broader patterns (not merely for their antiquarian or genealogical interest as previously undertaken), career-line analysis of a sample group of individuals, and quantification with the aid of the computer.

The new social history is not without its weaknesses. The misapplication of social science models can produce ahistorical results. Psychohistory is the best example, although work with theoretical economic models and political voting patterns is not far behind. When psychological insights are used to illuminate evidence, the results can be richly stimulating but, when evidence is sought primarily to fit or "prove" some psychological model, the past is necessarily distorted. A second danger is faddishness. Many "new" historians exude an almost messianic conviction that history not concerned with the oppressed and inarticulate is at best old fashioned and at worst irrelevant. Such a "new" topic as "Buggery and the British Navy During the Napoleonic Wars" — not, Stone notes, one of "the more historically significant aspects of that period of European crisis and upheaval" — carries "fashionable faddishness" too far. Finally, the computer is the social historian's best friend and worst enemy. It opens many doors, but leads as well up many blind alleys. Certainly the computer "can answer more questions and test more multiple correlations than any human mind could handle in a lifetime," but it also demands data in clearly defined, precise categories. Life is fortunately not like that: the ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity of reality sometimes cannot be logically coded for machine manipulation. Quantitative analysis can, furthermore, lead to "a simplistic mechanistic determinism" by which only the quantifiable aspects of human endeavour are deemed to be historically significant. By ignoring the crucial role in history of the irrational, personal idiosyncrasy, and accident, computerized history can become sterile.

Stone's essay, and those which follow on urban history, demography, and the history of science that flesh out his ideas, offer many insights to new historiographical trends. From the examples and interpretations given, the archivist can readily read between the lines to discover the new types of sources that must be collected and understood. Of particular interest is the piece on the history of science. Many archivists, especially in federal, provincial, and university archives, collect the records of agencies having a large component of research scientists. As few archivists have any scientific training, the problem of assessing the potential historical significance of technical scientific notebooks, laboratory reports, draft monographs, and so forth is difficult indeed. Cohen's essay sheds some light on this issue.

Taking a different tack, Conkin argues shamelessly for elitist intellectual history. Social analysis may well allow historians to learn that each spring a particular tribe went further up the mountain but, until some knowledge of its value systems and ideals is obtained, which means studying the ideas of its articulate leaders, no one will know whether the tribe wanted greener pastures for its flocks or closer proximity during summer solstice to the sun god which its members worshipped. In short, the human mind is the basic factor in history. Human motivation and, thus, history itself is not based necessarily on what *was* real and quantifiable, but on what people *perceived* to be real. The study of systems of ideas is consequently not likely to be soon discarded.

Wright's often amusing survey of contemporary history challenges archivists' very existence. Conceding that historians who follow too closely at the heels of recent events may well have their brains kicked out, Wright nevertheless believes that contemporary history is more than "historical journalism" or "provisional" history. The main charges against it — inadequate archival sources, excessive subjectivity, and stunted perspective — apply as well to earlier periods, although in different ways. He contends that the explosion of print and broadcast sources in the twentieth century has reduced archival holdings, with few exceptions, to secondary importance for an historian's research. His disdain for "the fetishism of documents" may alarm some readers of this journal.

Certainly one would have liked in *The Future of History* more such essays — on the history of women, labour, ethnic groups, native peoples — and fewer on specific national or regional topics. Even writing for historians, some of the authors should have enumerated much more carefully the kinds of sources needed by social historians to advance their work to more sophisticated levels. Nevertheless, the volume is a fine introduction to the general themes of the new history.

In many ways, Carl Berger's *The Writing of Canadian History* is the converse of *The Future of History*. Whereas the authors of that volume predict the future, Berger explains the past. Although he is not unmindful of present trends and possible future directions of Canadian historiography, he feels that any appreciation of new growth in the branches first requires a sound understanding of the nature of the roots and trunk. His volume very successfully supplies that understanding, for it is a remarkably subtle analysis of major trends in Canadian historiography. Already widely and favourably reviewed and recipient of the Governor-General's Award for Non-Fiction, Berger's book should need little introduction or extended comment here.

In many ways, the volume transcends historiography to become an intellectual history of English Canada in the twentieth century. Historical writing usually reflects the cultural and social milieu of the historian and so, by examining the background, convictions, and interpretations of leading historians, Berger has fashioned a mirror in which is reflected the major contours in Canadian nationalist thought. The book presents as much the evolving image of the nation as the details of its history. The nature of his subject also leads Berger to discuss the recurrent debate of the proper role of the intellectual: whether the public controversialist such as Frank Underhill who virtually abandoned serious historical research for radical politics and journalism, or the "ivory tower" scholar such as Harold Innis who disdained involvement in transient current events, or a mixture of the two such as achieved by A.R.M. Lower, Donald Creighton, and W.L. Morton.

Berger tosses a broad net. The first major interpretation of Canada's past by professional historians, as contrasted to the works of amateurs and journalists in the nineteenth century, was the constitutionalism of G.M. Wrong, W.P.M. Kennedy, and Chester Martin. Behind their sometimes arid description of the growth of responsible government lay a deep faith in the mystical links joining Canada first to the British Empire and then the Commonwealth. This standard view was challenged by Frank Underhill and Harold Innis. Much sympathetic to the economic protests of western progressives and socialists, and borrowing extensively from such "debunking" American historians as Carl Becker and Charles Beard, Underhill attacked the political naiveté of the Anglophile constitutionalists and proceeded to lay bare the economic, sectional, class, and North American isolationist trends of Canadian development. Innis' work on the staple theory of economic development, his assertion that geography united rather than divided the country, and his enunciation of the concept of "cyclonics" were seminal contributions to Canadian historiography and inspired much of the early work of Lower, Creighton, and Marshall McLuhan. The Second World War and the Cold War led to much confusion, for the isolationism and

economic determinism of the 1930s were clearly out of favour: Lower turned to creating a national mythology based on two ways of life, Underhill abandoned socialism for Liberalism, and Innis was attracted to the study of communications. In this turmoil of the early 1950s Creighton emerged as the major figure. To him history was an art and his biography of John A. Macdonald both evinced a sense of the nation's mood and inaugurated an era of historical biography. At the same time the regional focus of W.L. Morton indicated the value of studies below the national level; work on such "limited identities" as class, region, and culture seems to be the wave of the future. Concentration on "nation-building . . . neglects and obscures even while it explains and illuminates, and may tell us less about the Canada that now is than the Canada that should have been — but has not come to pass." (p. 263) In short, Canadian historians, like those writing in *The Future of History*, are turning away from national history and concentrating on the pluralistic elements of which the nation is composed.

The Writing of Canadian History is far more subtle than this crude summary suggests. Although it deals with scores of historians, the reader is never subjected to a catalogue of names or titles, but rather to a careful analysis of Canadian historiography. By understanding the rich tradition which Berger illuminates, archivists will appreciate new trends and departures in current historiography. As an aside, archivists will also enjoy the tantalizingly brief glimpses at the archival world of Brymner, Doughty, and Shortt, a world with no small impact on the professionalization of Canadian history.

The Writing of Canadian History and *The Future of History* permit the archivist to begin acquiring a sound historiographical knowledge. But they are only the first step, for any chapter in either book could easily be expanded into a full volume by itself. A second step is doubtless a careful reading of those historians writing in *Archivaria* specifically to inform archivists of new historical trends and the archival sources need to sustain them.³ But even this is not enough. It is one thing to tell archivists what new kinds of sources are historically significant; it is another for archivists to actually read the new history and see for themselves how the source materials are being exploited. Obviously, the second situation will make the deeper and truer impression and alone permit archivists to add the sophisticated historiographical perspective so necessary for their acquisition, custodial, and reference functions.

No thinking person would desire to swing the pendulum so far back that archivists again became — if they ever were — only historians writ small. With the explosion of documentary material and the growing complexity of archival problems, scholarly attention must continue to be devoted to the unique concerns of the archival profession. But in archivists' understandable zeal to tackle these problems and map out the unique perimeters of their profession, let them not forget the historical basis upon which so many archival functions must always rest. Let them yield to the charms of the muse of history. Blindness to this more traditional side of the archival dichotomy will destroy archivists' claim to true professionalism, for in perfecting alone the forms and techniques they will have lost the substance.

3 Two fine recent examples are Russell G. Hann and Gregory S. Kealey, "Documenting Working Class History: North American Traditions and New Approaches," *Archivaria* 4 (Summer 1977): 92-114; and G.J. Parr, "Case Records as Sources for Social History," *Archivaria* 4 (Summer 1977): 122-36.